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8 North American Indigenous Song, the Sacred and the Senses

Byron Dueck

Song plays a central role in many forms of North American Indigenous sacred observance. In the western Canadian city of Winnipeg, where I began ethnographic fieldwork in the early 2000s, two kinds of singing are especially important: drum song, which is heard in both traditional ceremonies and public performances, and gospel singing, widely performed at funerary wakes.

The most public contexts for drum song are powwows – large gatherings where it accompanies dancing in a range of traditional and neo-traditional styles. These events can be overwhelming for a first-time visitor. There is in the first place a profusion of things to see: dances in various genres bring several performers together at the centre of the arena, but although they wear similar kinds of regalia and dance in the same styles, both clothing and choreography are highly personalised, and there is a great deal of particularity to take in. Powwows are also aurally imposing: singers at northern events tend to perform with high, tensed voices and a wide vibrato, and they accompany themselves on impressively loud drums. In echoing arenas with the singing amplified through a large sound system, one can feel completely surrounded by the sound, with the drum in particular impacting not just the ears but the whole body.

Gospel singing is more subdued, especially when sung at wakes and funerals, its most important contexts of performance. I regularly attended such events in Winnipeg in 2002 and 2003, frequenting also a handful of coffeehouses where Indigenous gospel musicians met to sing in less serious circumstances. A range of singers from different communities and Indigenous groups participated in the latter gatherings, where nearly anyone was welcome to participate. At one coffeehouse, I occasionally played bass with the band that accompanied the performers. In this role, I was struck by the distinctive rhythmic interpretations different singers brought to the same songs, and how these necessitated continual recalibrations on the part of the musicians performing with them. I also participated in drum singing from time to

time – it was a regular activity at the urban powwow clubs I attended – and developed some familiarity with how it felt to perform in that style.

This chapter reflects on experiences of these two kinds of song to suggest some of the ways that sound, and especially music, shapes the experience of the sacred. It argues that music, by means of what I will call its mutable iconicity, is especially well suited to mediating sacred presences and processes. I also explore how musical practices assert and engender social difference: in the case of Indigenous song, this happens through not only the prominent use of distinctive languages, instruments, genres and styles of vocal production, but also the inclusive and participatory character of the contexts in which this music-making occurs.

Drum song

Before European contact, the great majority of North American Indigenous music was song, often accompanied by percussion instruments such as drums and rattles (see Nettl 2001: 263–264; Diamond et al. 1994). Notwithstanding the active suppression of Indigenous traditions under colonialism, drum song persists in many Indigenous communities, and practices continue to emerge, circulate and be adopted, sometimes in places far from their point of origin, or where older traditions had nearly been extinguished.

In part thanks to revivals, drum song has a significant place in Winnipeg, a city with one of the largest populations of urban Indigenous people in North America. This heterogeneous population comprises Métis, Anishinaabe (Ojibwe), Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene people, among others, with Northern Algonquians (Anishinaabe, Cree, Oji-Cree and Métis of related heritage) playing an especially prominent part in shaping contemporary Indigenous musical life. For this reason I will sometimes refer to ‘Northern Algonquian’ song and sacred observance, a term that has the advantage of highlighting their contributions to these practices, and the disadvantage of de-emphasising other groups, especially the Dakota, who have played a central role in preserving and disseminating drum song.

Drum song is most commonly performed by solo singers accompanying themselves on hand drums, or by drum groups consisting of several musicians seated around a large drum positioned with the skin facing upward. While drum songs employ special formal structures that reflect their Indigenous origins (see Levine and Nettl 2011), they are generally straightforward and readily learned by non-specialists. It is not unusual to hear children singing the same songs as adults, whether at social gatherings for young people or in public performance.

Drums are employed to do sacred work and are considered sacred themselves. On the one hand, they frequently accompany songs that address and invoke sacred beings, including Gichi Manidoo (Great Spirit), Makwa (Bear) and Ma'iingan (Wolf), to use the Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe language) terms.¹ On the other, they are often understood to *have* spirits, and singers are careful to treat them with respect. That drums both have spirits and enable communication with them hints at some of the complex ways music mediates spiritual presences and processes, a topic addressed at greater length below.

Drum song is central to many sacred ceremonies. I will not say much about these events, in part because of concerns that publishing detailed accounts of them is disrespectful to the people and spirit beings who are present at them, and in part because it is considered problematic for non-Indigenous persons like me to seek advantage as brokers of ceremonial knowledge.² Accordingly, in what follows, I recount only information that is widely known, focusing for the most part on powwows, gatherings that incorporate sacred elements, but are nevertheless open to the public.³

Powwows are large gatherings where dancers in special regalia perform in a range of genres to music provided by drum groups (see Figure 8.1). The latter are ensembles comprising several drumming singers seated around a large drum positioned with skin facing upward (see

¹ Ojibwe pronunciation and spelling vary widely; spelling here follows the *Ojibwe People's Dictionary* (University of Minnesota 2016).

² This is not to say scholarly accounts of these ceremonies do not exist; see for instance Deloria 1929 or Bucko 1998.

³ On the powwow, see Browner 2002; Ellis et al. 2005; Scales 2007 and 2012; Levine 2013.

Figure 8.2), sometimes with additional standing singers. A gendered division of musical labour, understood to be in keeping with tradition (see Browner 2002: 73; Perea 2014: 27–28), holds at most powwows: women typically do not sit at or play the drums. It is not unusual, however, for female singers to stand just outside the circle of seated drummers and sing along with them, sometimes at the same pitch and sometimes an octave higher. There do exist drum groups with female members, and indeed all-woman drum groups, but these remain in the minority.

<**Figure 8.1** Fancy Shawl dancers performing at Manito Ahbee 2016 International Pow Wow. Photograph by Ginger Johnson.>

<**Figure 8.2** Drum group performing at Manito Ahbee 2016 International Pow Wow. Photograph by Ginger Johnson.>

The powwow emerged in the United States during the late nineteenth century, drawing on traditional Plains songs and dances on the one hand and influences from the Wild West show on the other (Levine 2013). It has since then spread across North America, including to communities whose traditional musical and choreographic practices are very different from those of the Plains (see Powers 1990; Goertzen 2001; Browner 2002 and 2009; Hoefnagels 2002; Whidden 2007). Thus, although the contemporary powwow incorporates practices from First Nations whose traditional territories coincide with what is now Manitoba, its presence in many communities is relatively recent, and during fieldwork I talked to a number of Indigenous elders who did not witness their first powwow until well after World War Two.

Some powwows are competitive events at which dancers can win significant sums of money; others (frequently distinguished as ‘traditional powwows’) are non-competitive gatherings held in honour of particular people or to mark special community occasions (see Scales 2007 and 2012). While powwows are open and public when compared to more traditional ceremonies, they nevertheless incorporate a number of sacred elements (see Scales 2012: 60–61). In Manitoba they open with prayer, and sometimes a pipe ceremony; dance outfits

frequently incorporate elements that reflect the dancer's spiritual characteristics; and drums are honoured through the observance of special protocols.⁴

Drum song at these events engages the senses in distinctive ways, involving hearing as well as the bodily experiences of singing and dancing to the songs. (As this suggests, although this chapter focuses on hearing, it is also concerned with the senses more broadly.) Beginning with hearing, the most immediately notable characteristic of powwow music is its volume (see Perea 2014: 16–17). Powwow drums are large, loud instruments, and their volume can be overwhelming when all of the members of a drum group are singing at the tops of their voices and striking the centre of the drum skin in unison with their drumsticks (it can be even more so when the singing is amplified, as it is at larger powwows).

Other vocal elements of powwow song are also remarkable. In the northern style of singing that predominates where I do my research, singers perform with tense voices, beginning each song at the top of their vocal register in an arresting wail (lower-pitched singing is more common in other parts of the continent). As noted, most drum groups are made up entirely of men, and the result is the sound of a chorus of male voices at their limits. A third notable element is the texture of the music: the singers perform in unison (and occasionally octaves), accompanied only by the sound of the drum and any instruments that are part of dancers' clothing; for example, the metal cones that make up part of the Jingle Dress regalia. Lastly, what is sung is also distinctive; much of it consists of vocables (sung, non-lexical syllables), for instance, 'wey-yah-hey-yah' or 'wey-hey-yo'. Words, meanwhile, tend to be in Indigenous rather than settler languages.

Does everyone – insiders and outsiders, those who grew up hearing such singing and those who did not – hear these aspects of powwow singing as 'distinctive' or 'striking'? It may be more accurate to say that to most North American listeners, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, powwow songs sound markedly different from the songs that predominate in the settler public sphere (i.e. in public contexts in which non-Indigenous participants are in the majority). They

⁴ For instance, Scales describes how the area around a drum is kept clean at a powwow, how the drum is always left attended, and how sweetgrass may be burned for it (2012: 75, 123–24).

are in a more extreme vocal register, they are sung with more vocal tension, and they have a sparser texture, involving a single melodic line supported by a drum, rather than a combination of vocal and instrumental forces that generate harmony. Further, much of the singing is wordless.

The singing also engages other senses in those who take part. Perhaps most notable for the adult male singers who make up the majority of practitioners is the experience of moving between states of vocal tension and relaxation. Songs in the northern style, as mentioned, begin at the very top of the male range, gradually descending to a much lower pitch during the course of each strophe.⁵ The name given to strophes in this music – push-ups – captures this trajectory nicely. It is less indicative of the experience of female singers: women often sing in the same octave as men at the beginning of a strophe – well within a comfortable vocal range – and then shift into a higher octave when the melody moves too low. As this suggests, language about the singing tends to assume masculine experience as the default.

Northern-style singing offers a number of opportunities for the gendered performance of effortful musical labour. Male singers occasionally clutch their throats at the beginning of a push-up, constricting their larynxes to help them attain the spectacular high notes characteristic of this style of singing (see Scales 2012: 80). Singing also involves exertions that can injure singers, and it is not unusual to hear simultaneously proud and rueful statements that one's throat hurts after having sung too much over a weekend. (Some singers find strategies to achieve the desired vocal sound without strain or pain, it is important to add.)

Many of those who listen to powwow songs are dancers, of course. Indeed, dancers need to listen closely and attend to the formal structure of songs, since it is expected that, in performance, they will stop exactly on the final beat of the last strophe (in some cases, a song they are hearing for the very first time). Many of the dance styles performed at powwows are physically demanding, so hearing and attending to songs accompanies activity that is both exhausting and exhilarating.

⁵ On the structure of powwow songs, see Browner 2002 and 2009; Levine and Nettl 2011; Scales 2012.

Gospel song

In gospel singing, the second of the singing practices to be considered here, native singers perform a mixture of hymns, songs associated with the Pentecostal tradition, and popular songs on Christian themes. These make use of European harmonic and melodic conventions and are sung to guitar, rather than drum, accompaniment, in a manner closely informed by the stylistic conventions of the popular genre of country music. All of this may seem a long way from drum songs that address spirit grandmothers and grandfathers (Anishinaabe people often refer to spirits using these terms). Yet a number of factors make it clear that gospel songs are also Indigenous music.⁶ They are often sung in Aboriginal languages and at gatherings where the great majority of attendees are Native, and they are an integral component of funerary rituals that play an important part in community life (of which more shortly). Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of my research participants regularly attend both events where drum song is heard and gatherings where gospel song is performed. Some of the older ones were familiar with Christian hymns long before they heard the drum songs associated with the powwow (the dissemination by missionaries of hymns in Cree and Anishinaabe communities began in the middle of the nineteenth century, perhaps a century before modern powwow singing and dancing arrived in some places).

Gospel singing is heard in church services, but associated in an especially close way with gatherings where clergy are less visible: informal singing sessions and (especially) funerary rituals. When someone dies, the community often holds a wake for one or more nights before the funeral. Family and friends sit with the deceased, while groups and individuals take turns singing gospel songs through the night. While clergy sometimes contribute to the gathering, it is above all community members who attend to the bereaved in song. Both men and women participate in the singing, whether as soloists or choristers (although men are much more likely to occupy roles as members of the bands that accompany the singing). This way of observing the death of a loved one is common enough that the Aboriginal Funeral Chapel, a

⁶ On 'unexpected' Indigenous musics, see Perea 2012, which draws on Deloria's work on 'Indians in unexpected places' (Deloria 2004).

business in Winnipeg's North End, advertises itself specifically to families that wish to hold overnight services.

The songs heard at wakes are much more like the music that predominates in the mainstreams of North American public life than drum song: the repertoire makes use of strophic patterns and a harmonic and melodic language that can be found in musics of European origin from nineteenth-century hymns onward. All the same, this music is marked in certain ways, most notably through the use of elements borrowed from country music, including a tense vocal style and ornaments known as cry breaks – ‘constrictions of the vocal articulatory mechanism that “pinch” a note in midstream, producing either momentary silence or grace-note movements into falsetto registers’ (Fox 2004: 280–281). Thus, while gospel singing connects Indigenous communities to wider realms of Christian practice, it does so through sounds associated with rural and working-class musical life.

Notable in the experience of performing this music is a sense of physical negotiation. Many gospel songs follow straightforward formulas and can be accompanied using just a few guitar chords. This makes the music amenable to not only participation by non-specialists, but also impromptu performances between people who do not regularly make music together. Wakes frequently bring together musicians from different communities and congregations (see Dueck 2013: 109), so spur-of-the-moment collaborations are not uncommon. However, different singers perform the same songs in ways that are rhythmically distinctive, sometimes idiosyncratically so, and their collaborators are often forced to make rapid recalibrations to accommodate unexpected musical shifts.

The wakes at which gospel music is sung are notable for not only their inclusivity but their length, and their demands on participants. As noted, singing starts in the evening and often goes on until early in the morning, and it is not unusual for a wake to run for two or even three nights. Singers can travel long distances to take part in these events, then stay up late once they arrive. So, while the most obvious sensory component of the wake is the sound of

song, physical fatigue is also a factor, experienced to various degrees by participants depending on their roles.

Musicians understand singing at the wake as an act of comfort. Singer Emery Marsden told me:

When I started going to wakes ... the first thing that I heard was 'Amazing Grace' and 'In the Sweet By and By' and all these songs. ... I used to see people get uplifted by these songs, and they'd sit there all night and sing these psalms and comfort the family that would be mourning. But I'd sit there at times myself ... there's times when my loved ones passed away ... I used to sit there and I'd listen to the people that would sing It would be like having a cup of coffee. I'd sit there and I'd listen, and the mourning part of me would be at ease because of the music. (Interview with the author, August 2003, quoted in Dueck 2013: 111)

Marsden's words, even now, evoke for me very specific memories: nights spent surrounded by gospel singing; singers arriving at a wake with cups of takeout coffee in hand; a table of food and drink, a large percolator in the middle, at a late-night vigil at the Aboriginal Funeral Chapel.

Through his everyday simile, Marsden invited me to think of song as a substance that acts on its recipients. In the same way that a cup of coffee warms hands and stomach, music consoles the bereaved (see Dueck 2013: 111–112). The singer's image imparted rhetorical weight to his claim concerning the efficacy of music, rendering song as warming, infilling stuff, something more than mere sound.

Music and the sacred sensorium

Marsden's image of song as a substance may seem unremarkable, but it invites reflection for exactly this reason – and here I move beyond my interview with him to consider why it seems appropriate to speak of music in similar ways in many different cultural contexts. It probably has to do in part with the way that sound is conveyed through substances, especially fluid media such as the air. It also has to do with the sense that one can be immersed in or

surrounded by sound in the same way one might be by air, smoke or water.⁷ Further, many kinds of music are sustained and *ongoing* (consider how Marsden speaks of coffee, a substance that one imbibes over time, that warms drinkers, that keeps them awake). This ongoing-ness is true of both the traditional sacred song and Christian music described earlier, in which the sustained sounds of voices are accompanied by more rapidly decaying but nonetheless regular noises: of drums and rattles in traditional music and of the guitar in gospel singing. It is also true of many musics beyond those considered in this chapter – although the concepts of fluidness and ongoing-ness seem particularly appropriate when one reflects on the sensation of singing, in which one feels oneself producing sustained sound as one controls how one’s breath exits the body.

Sound is treated as substance in sacred contexts far from those that are the focus of this chapter. Consider for example the following description of ‘spells accompanied by simple rites of impregnation’ from Malinowski’s discussion of the magic practices of Trobriand Islanders in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*:

In [a number of performances of spells of impregnation] an object is put well within reach of the voice, and in an appropriate position. Often, the object is placed within a receptacle or covering so that the voice enters an enclosed space and is concentrated upon the substance to be charged. ... [For example], the adze blade is first of all half wrapped up in a banana leaf, and the voice enters the blade and the inside of the leaf, which subsequently is folded over and tied over the blade (1932 [1922]: 405).

In Malinowski’s description, the words and sounds of the charm are not only concentrated on their object, as substances whose flow is directed, but physically wrapped in place around it.⁸

In many other contexts as well, talk and behaviour highlight the substantial aspect of sacred sound. Why is this? One answer is that sound, perhaps especially musical sound, is amenable, by means of a vague and mutable iconicity, to the representation of otherwise invisible

⁷ There is a resonance here with a remark in McLuhan and Fiore’s *The Medium is the Massage*: ‘We are *enveloped* by sound. It forms a seamless web around us. We say, “Music shall fill the air.” We never say, “Music shall fill a particular segment of the air”’ (1967: 111; emphasis in original).

⁸ This observation was inspired by remarks by Michael Silverstein in one of his 2002 ‘Language in Culture’ lectures at the University of Chicago.

processes and persons. I draw the term ‘iconicity’ from the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, who describes an icon as a symbol that represents its referent by means of some similarity of form.⁹ The relationship between the sound in a stethoscope and the beating of an unseen heart is one example; the relationship between the increasing volume of a voice and the growing closeness of the speaker is another. I argue that sound is well-suited to representing sacred processes and presences by a similar kind of iconic signification (although people and groups make use of this affordance in a range of ways, some more established or sanctioned than others).

To elaborate, sacred sounds lend themselves in the first place to accomplishing things: enacting invisible or abstract *processes*. In the Indigenous communities where I do research, surrounding a bereaved community member with song extends comfort, while singing an honour song to a person or spirit being communicates reverence. Another example is the process of invocation: music is often bound up with the summoning of spirit beings. At many formal Indigenous assemblies, it is common to sing songs that invite specific spirits to come into the presence of those who have gathered. Other examples can be found in musics of possession: the music at the Shona *bira* summons ancestors (see Berliner 1993 [1978]: 186–206), and the melodies of Tunisian *ṣṭambēlī* ‘coax [spirits] to descend into the bodies of dancing hosts’ (Jankowsky 2010: 2). Further, music may enact more than one process simultaneously: many Christians understand congregational singing not only to convey praise to God, but also to transmit God’s blessings back to worshippers. Melvin Butler writes, ‘Music in the Pentecostal church is a vehicle for praising and worshiping God and in return receiving the spiritual strength to persevere through life’s hardships. In the words of a well-known gospel chorus, “When praises go up, blessings come down”’ (Butler 2000: 33).

Sacred music also lends itself to representing the *presence* of beings or powers. This is most evident in instances when it evokes or triggers states that correspond to what one might feel in those presences: exhilaration, awe, a transformation of the experience of passing time. Sacred

⁹ See Peirce (1960: 143) on iconicity as it relates especially to music, see Turino (1999: 226–27, 242–44; 2008: 6–8).

presences may also be associated with sounds within the music. In the singing of Sardinian confraternities described by Bernard Lortat-Jacob, four-man choirs sing devotional music in harmony in a way that can produce the *quintina*, an apparent fifth voice associated with the Virgin Mary (1998: 15, 151–152).¹⁰ Lortat-Jacob writes:

the *quintina* is a woman: the gender of the word attests it, but more still the timbre, light and ethereal, contrasting with that of the powerful male voices that produce it. The *Miserere*, the *Jesu*, or the *Stabba* [pieces sung by the groups] therefore take on the aspect of a long lamentation that the dramatic context of the Passion invites hearing as that of the Virgin. (1998: 152, translation by the present author)

Sensory practices other than music similarly lend themselves to the representation of the unseen through their surrounding-ness, indwelling-ness and ongoing-ness. Indigenous ceremonial practice alone contains many examples. At a range of gatherings, smudging (censing) with burning sage effects the purification of persons and objects. Certain ceremonies involve the voluntary endurance of hunger or pain, by which participants earn the pity of the Great Spirit. And in the sweat lodge (a ceremony in which participants sit in a domed hut around heated stones over which water is poured) those taking part are surrounded by heat and steam at the same time that they are in the presence of spirits. Yet other sustained and immersive sensory experiences are encountered in the chapters in this volume; see for example Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme's discussion of the smells of sacred observance.

To sum up the argument so far, participants in ritual represent sacred presences and processes by means of iconic sensory experiences that they themselves generate; music, thanks to its surrounding-ness, infilling-ness and ongoing-ness, lends itself particularly well to this. The argument has some formal similarities to Durkheim's theory that social groups misinterpret their social power as a sacred force originating outside themselves (Durkheim 1995 [1912]). There is an important difference, however: the theory advanced here does not require naive participants to misunderstand music – or the transformations engendered by hearing, producing or moving to it – as the represented process or presence itself. Music may embody

¹⁰ This is an effect of certain harmonics being reinforced when the singers blend their voices in a particular way. See also Bithell 1999: 118.

the presence/process or merely symbolise or accompany it, and participants may or may not be 'naive'.

A few more general caveats can also be noted. First, not all religious practices make use of music's mutable potential for iconicity, and not all uses of this potential are religious.¹¹ For example, music is regarded with suspicion or ambivalence in a number of manifestations of both Christianity and Islam. Second, although the iconicity of these surrounding, ongoing and indwelling sensations is often compelling, it does not determine reactions. It rather affords a range of responses and interpretations, collective and personal, official and demotic. This is evident in Owen Coggins's research on drone metal (Coggins 2016), a genre of popular music whose canonical recordings feature long, low, heavily distorted sonorities, and in which religious imagery and even quotations from religious texts appear. Drone metal epitomises the capacity of music to engage the senses in immersive ways, particularly in live performances where it is heard at deafeningly loud volume. But Coggins's interviews with listeners indicate they have no difficulty distinguishing immersive sensory experiences from experiences they understand as religious, even when there might be good reasons for them to blur the categories. Coggins writes, 'For listeners who [stated] commitment to particular religions, aspects of drone metal described as ritual and even spiritual or mystical were generally compared with, but sharply differentiated from, each [listener's] religious practice' (2016: 254).

All the same, immersive and indwelling experiences are widely associated with spiritual processes and presences, and music seems to afford particularly significant opportunities for this by means of an iconicity that can stand for many things. Consider again the drums used in Indigenous song, which are at once incorporated in songs that summon spirits and understood to have spirits themselves. Their sound is both a signal used as part of the *process* of invoking spirits and a sign of the *presence* of the spirit of the drum. This flexible iconicity is probably

¹¹ The idea of a potential that actors may or may not activate resonates with the concept of musical affordances described by writers such as Tia DeNora (2000: 39–40) and Martin Clayton (2001: 6–9).

one reason why, across many times and places, there has been a close connection between religion on the one hand and music, song and heightened speech on the other.¹²

Music's place in the Indigenous sacred sensorium

Having outlined a general argument concerning music and the sacred sensorium, I return here to the specificities of the music-making with which I began. How do these singing practices distinguish an *Indigenous* sensorium?

They do so in part through the markedness of particular vocal sounds. The high, tense sound of northern-style drum singing is one of the definitive sonic indices of North American Indigeneity, for insiders and outsiders alike. In contrast, the vocal sound of country gospel music has much wider associations, namely with working-class and rural audiences where non-Indigenous people are in the majority. Yet these vocal sounds, too, instantiate distinctiveness, given that many Native people share a working-class habitus and ties to rural communities. And while powwow song affirms a legacy of Indigenous musical practice, it has more in common with gospel singing than might initially be apparent: both reflect a history of colonialism.¹³ Returning to the main point, while the music that helps to distinguish spaces of Indigenous sacred observance is not always unique to Indigenous people, it nevertheless differentiates those spaces: from settler society in the case of drum song, and from middle-class music worlds in the case of gospel singing.¹⁴

Indigenous musical and sacred life are also distinguished by their approaches to temporality and participation. Ceremonies, rites of passage and social gatherings often last for long spans of time: some traditional ceremonies are held over the course of four days; wakes run through the night, and sometimes for more than one night. These events feature nearly constant music-

¹² Bruno Nettl, in a core ethnomusicological text, suggests that one of the primary purposes of music across cultures is to 'control humanity's relationship to the supernatural, mediating between human and other beings' (2005: 253).

¹³ A great deal of contemporary drum song makes use of musical structures closely related to the powwow, which, as noted earlier, has roots in part in early Wild West shows. The 'country' vocal style associated with gospel music, meanwhile, is closely associated with romantic images of a frontier west. In short, both singing styles stand in dialogue with realms of commercial culture that have mediated colonial understandings of Indigeneity (which is not to say that they repeat these understandings in any straightforward way; see Dueck 2013: 25–26, 73–81).

¹⁴ I borrow the term 'music worlds' from Ruth Finnegan (2007 [1989]) who in turn bases it on Howard Becker's concept of 'art worlds' (Becker 2008 [1982]).

making by a series of musicians and/or groups. Important events tend to take up time, articulated through a steady succession of singers and songs (cf. Nettl 2001: 259). They also allow for extensive musical participation, being guided by the principle that anyone who wishes should be able to take part, specialists and non-specialists alike. Ceremonies, rites of passage and social gatherings thus present opportunities for multiple participants to make contributions that express their particularity within a context of collective endeavour.

Perhaps paradoxically, the inclusiveness of events at which gospel song is performed allows for individuality to be highlighted. As noted earlier, it is not unusual for gospel singers to have highly distinctive takes on familiar pieces. When such musicians come together to perform, as often happens at wakes, their individual approaches often necessitate mid-performance scrambles to accommodate unexpected musical turns, interactions that instantiate personal idiosyncrasy with especial immediacy. The experience of making music in these circumstances is both a moment of collaboration and an embodied encounter with unruly personal difference.

Other than the fact that it is Indigenous people who are involved, how are the inclusive, participatory and particularity-friendly spaces discussed here – and the kinds of sensations cultivated in them – Indigenous? This question seems especially pertinent given that gospel singing is not a strictly Indigenous musical activity (see Quick 2016). I suggest that drum song and wake singing continue an emphasis, evident in older Northern Algonquian sacred practice, on the importance of particular individuals and their gifts to their communities. In the Ojibwe and Cree hunting communities studied in the middle of the twentieth century by anthropologists such as A.I. Hallowell (1955 and 1992), Leonard Mason (1967) and Edward Rogers (1962), the most central sacred experiences traditionally took the form of encounters with spirits dreamed in the course of a solitary fast. It was similarly through dreams that new sacred ceremonies and their attendant songs, dances and regalia were gifted to particular persons (see Landes 1968). In these ways, religious experience was highly individuated. At the same time, those blessed through dream encounters employed their gifts for the good of their communities. Contemporary forms of Indigenous assembly – in which long spans of

time allow for contributions from both specialists and non-specialists, and in which individual idiosyncrasy both enriches and complicates collective action – enact a form of continuity with these older aspects of Northern Algonquian sacred life.¹⁵

Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered two forms of sacred music practised in Indigenous communities in and around the western Canadian city of Winnipeg: drum song and gospel singing. Reflection on these led in the first place to the idea that the surrounding-ness, infilling-ness and ongoing-ness of music lend themselves to the mediation of sacred presences and processes. Such mediations, though hardly universal, are widespread, and music, by means of its potential for iconicity, seems particularly suited to them. Reflection on the two singing practices secondly suggested how it is that Native communities in this part of North America cultivate an Indigenous sacred sensorium. They do so by using distinctive vocal styles, by holding gatherings that are participatory and temporally expansive, and by undertaking forms of music-making that foreground both the challenges and benefits of inclusion. In exploring the two singing practices, I did not seek to distinguish the degree to which their musical components represent an authentic Indigeneity. I characterised both as Indigenous, not out of any particular sympathy for Christianity, or in an attempt to deny the devastating impact of colonialism on Aboriginal religion, but rather in acknowledgement that both are widely practised in Indigenous communities and that both lend themselves to the elaboration of certain valued modes of Northern Algonquian sociability.

It remains to draw together the general and the specific arguments. Music's mutable iconicity presents general opportunities for representing sacred presences and processes, but these are realised in culturally specific ways. It is important to the communities discussed in this chapter that their members should pass long nights comforting the bereaved, and that these times together should allow anyone who has something to contribute to participate. It matters that the sound of adult male voices at their limits should be a privileged part of drum songs, and that these songs should be sung as a mixture of vocables and words in Indigenous

¹⁵ I make this case at greater length in Dueck 2013.

languages. That the gendered division of labour in drum song is subject to contemporary negotiation indicates that how music is deployed changes over time, but this does not alter a more fundamental point: that communities make use of music's affordances for sacred experience in highly particularised ways.

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